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By Bret Hayworth Journal staff writer

Great Places endeavor could advance quality of life projects

Northwest Iowans who believe they're living in a vibrant corridor or special natural area could soon have a new way to improve and promote their great place.

Funding still needs to be approved by the Legislature, and if that happens, up to 18 state agencies would work together to offer services to kick the Great Places program into gear. The state is looking to pick three great places to serve as pilot programs to receive a combined \$8 million for improvements, although the projects would ultimately be more costly, since local funding matches by city, county and other entities would be a requirement.

That could mean more money funneled into broad places like the Loess Hills in western Iowa or the entire Mississippi River length along eastern Iowa. Or a great place could be a distinctive inner city neighborhood of 10 blocks or an ethnically historic cultural area. But a big push under the Great Places program announced Monday by Gov. Tom Vilsack is to think beyond borders, said Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs director Anita Walker, who serves as lead spokeswoman for Great Places.

Walker said the key thing with Great Places is to not be limited to city, county or other borders. "When a person is in a great place, they know they are there," she said. "... You know what the edges of the place are, you know where that natural boundary and natural definition is, and our nice, neat, little square counties probably virtually never conform to what is a natural, powerful place."

Such imprecise parameters aren't a problem, but rather a hallmark of Great Places, "one of the most exciting, unprecedented initiatives to come out of state government," Walker said. The program looks to greatly break the mold of government putting down too confining guidelines, she said, and as the three pilot programs are picked by the end of 2005, "we don't even like the word 'criteria'" for how they will be chosen.

Walker described a possible Great Places endeavor -- she doesn't like the word "project" either, since that connotes a stand-alone convention center or events center. An endeavor, Walker said, could involve "connecting a trail to the Main Street or downtown business district so people will get off the trail and come out and patronize the businesses. It may involve developing an array of interesting housing options in a downtown area, of various affordability levels, that connect to the trail that connect to the businesses that connect to the amphitheater that connects to the river -- whatever the Great Place concept is."

Iowa House District 55 Rep. Clarence Hoffman of Charter Oak said Iowa undoubtedly "is a great place to live" with lots of cultural and recreational opportunities. He said the Great Places concept pushed by the governor has merits and "marketing Iowa is very, very important." But he said he's not sure \$8 million will be appropriated for it. Hoffman said the program may achieve passage, "but maybe not at the funding level that (Vilsack) is suggesting."

If the program is funded by the legislature, some key dates -- including a July 1 application deadline -- must be met by those areas seeking to be the first three Great Places. Those will be explained more fully in a Sioux City town meeting on June 9 at the Martin Ballroom, while a Great Places meeting in Spencer has been set for May 18.

Walker said precise guidelines have yet to be set up, but figured projects most likely to be chosen as pilots are those with broad community support.

While many Iowa departments will converge to offer expertise to the pilot Great Places projects, the Cultural Affairs office headed by Walker will be among the lead agencies, along with the Iowa Department of Economic Development. "Art and culture is fuel, not frill," she said, and Great Places is "a quality of life issue."

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